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Objects of Loss

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Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
of Washington University in Saint Louis

Objects of Loss

By
Amanda Helman

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington
University in Saint Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master
of Fine Arts

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Essay Abstract

I use objects as sculpture in my attempt to make the intangible, tangible. Objects become a way to remember or go back to the past. These objects are often called souvenirs. Souvenirs are objects that we place meaning in to try to avoid loss. We apply narrative and that gives them value. Without these souvenirs, we fear that the memory will vanish or be lost. Experiencing loss is not just the wish for something to be there, it is also a negation. In other words, when we lose something, it is not that we wish to go back to past events, rather we long for the potential future that has ceased to exist. Souvenirs are not just reminders of the past, but reminders of the lost future that is no longer possible.

In my work each object is a cast of a container, specifically a box. I do not give the actual box; it is a cast, a stand-in for the real thing. This absence creates a longing for the actual thing. A cast essentially is an object trapped in time and marks the space between presence and absence. Gaston Bachelard says home is the ultimate place of intimacy.¹ Furthermore, attics, hidden, deep storage spaces, are the places in homes that evoke these intimate experiences. In my work, hundreds of porcelain slip cast boxes are stacked up to create a structure. They are arranged similarly to the way boxes are stored in an attic to create an intimate space. By casting boxes, I attempt to reveal the intimate. My work evokes a nostalgic response; the desperate desire to return to a time and place that never existed. Though this experience is often accompanied with mourning, it is intrinsic that we do experience this in order to solidify the intangible and immaterial.

Introduction

We are constantly trying to hold onto fleeting moments: to avoid the inevitable loss. We take pictures, we buy snow globes and shot glasses, we save a shell or a leaf from a vacation and then we put these souvenirs in a safe container where we can come to them and remember. Our desire for these souvenirs arises from the longing for the decaying memory, a nostalgic denial of loss. We are trying to preserve something important. We are trying to figure out a way to hang on to what is slipping away. In my work I use objects as sculpture as I attempt to concretize what essentially remains intangible and immaterial, to give shape and disposition to fragments, but all the while acquiescing to the inevitable: that eventually all things crumble and decay.

Loss and Longing

On the second floor of the house I grew up in, in the very back of a linen closet, was a secret little white door with a tiny doorknob. It led into the attic. I climbed through that tiny door and was engulfed in a room of pink insulation and stacked cardboard boxes. The boxes sunk back into the darkness and became the walls of the attic. They were filled with memories; Mementos from the house my dad single handedly built in Pennsylvania; Coats and jackets we would no longer need in the hot, muggy winters of Florida. The attic was a hidden, deep storage space full of memories and souvenirs of the past, but also fading fragments of the once potential future that was lost forever.

Rebecca Solnit retells a story of Gustave Flaubert: the story of his first love.² Flaubert was staying in a hotel in Marseilles where he shared a single kiss with a woman in the hallway. Some years later he tried to find this woman with no success. He did, however, reluctantly go back to the same hotel to find it had become a hair salon. He went up and got a haircut. While he was sitting there he looked into the next room and recognized the wallpaper. "The wallpaper had become an aid-memoire and a means of confirming and recovering moments, passions, lives...redolent of the irrecoverable past."³ Most objects exert their holding power because of a particular moment and circumstance in which they come into our lives.

In *Evocative Objects*, Henry Jenkins relives the moments before his mother died.⁴ He picked up a few comic books on his way to the hospice. When he was a boy and stayed home, sick in bed, his mom would pick up comic books for him when she went to the drugstore. She would sing to him and feel his head as he read. He recalls reading comics on the floor while his mother watched television. Robert F. Kennedy had been shot. He could see his mother crying, but he did not know how to comfort her. This is what drew him to comics the week his mother died. He was desperately trying to hang on to his mother.

In *The Faraway Nearby*, Rebecca Solnit looks back on the tumultuous years after her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. When her mother could no longer navigate her own home, Solnit and her brothers moved their mother into an Alzheimer's nursing home. Solnit re-lives these moments and the ones that follow through a heap of apricots. The apricots serve as a vehicle through which to forge associations and ideas about decay, loss, and temporality. Before she and her brothers sold their mother's home, one brother stripped the apricot tree in the backyard of all its fruit. Solnit received hundreds of apricots in boxes, which sat in a heap on her bedroom floor for a long time before she decided to do anything with them. Some began to rot and juices oozed out while she waited for a time to do something with them. She says, "It was a last harvest, a heap of fruit from a family tree, like the enigmatic gifts of fairy tales: magi seed, a key to an unknown door, a summoning incantation. Bottling, canning, composting, freezing, eating, and distilling them was the least of the tasks they posed. The apricots were a riddle I had to decipher, a tale whose meaning I had to make over the course of the next twelve months as almost everything went wrong."⁵ Solnit uses the

apricots as a point of reference, a mark of remembering, a souvenir. The object dematerializes and the narrative that is associated with the object remains. The material becomes the means in which the immateriality of the past can be recovered.

Susan Stewart speaks about the souvenir saying, “this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are replaceable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs...of events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.”⁶ In other words, we place meaning in objects or souvenirs to try to avoid loss.

A souvenir is an object we acquire for the memories it can be associated with. The object itself may have intrinsic value or simply be a symbol of past experience. But without our input, the symbolic meaning is hidden and cannot be articulated. A sense of past and memory is always encountered with objects. This is why Solnit comes back to the apricots time and again. Over the years she has given away countless jars of apricot preserves, but only two remain. She keeps them. She thinks about opening them for a special occasion, but none seem to be worthy enough. “The two jars before me are like stories written down; they preserve something that might otherwise vanish.”⁷

Experiencing loss is not just the wish that something will be there; it is also to experience a negation. The absence of what is missing completely negates the presence of all the things that I do not miss. The lost moment is lost forever. We are at the mercy of passing time. In his essay “Time, Pain, and Loss”, Lars Gustafsson describes loss as pain. He says, “...the very perception of time is associated with a kind of constant pain. Helplessly, we see the past whirl away in the wake of unreliable

memory. We fear the future, or we set our hopes on it. But in reality we only exist in the present.”⁸ He goes on to talk about the pain of the soul and how it is often related to events in time. This pain is the feeling of loss, of negation. It is something that is not present, has not existed, nor could have existed. In other words, it is not past events in our lives that we mourn and wish to go back to, rather, it is the loss of the potential of the future that we never had that we mourn. For example, if a loved one dies, it is not the past events with that person that we mourn; it is the imagined future with that person that is now lost forever that is mourned.

Flaubert’s wallpaper, Jenkins’ comic books, and Solnit’s apricots are all souvenirs of past experience, something for them to hang on to in order to remember the past, however they are also objects of loss. They are reminders of the potential future that never existed. My work has the feeling of something lost, a potential future that is no longer possible. (Figure 1) It is a loss we experience everyday, fading fragmented memories, the decay of time, and the longing for something that exists only in our minds: the potential future that is now gone. William Goyen explains this feeling,

“ So this is why when often as you came home to it, down the road in amidst of rain, it seemed as if the house were founded on the most fragile web of breath and you had blown it. Then you thought it might not exist at all as built by carpenter’s hands, nor had ever; and that it was only an idea of breath breathed out by you who, with the same breath that had blown it, could blow it all away.”⁹

My work evokes this sadness. My work becomes a memory of what has never been present. It is the near nothingness of the grieving future that never existed.



Figure 1, Amanda Helman, *Stack I (Detail)* 2015

Making the Absent Present

In our attempts to hang on we find objects to signify that particular time, that particular place, and remind us of that experience. Photographer Philip Toledano returns to the time after the sudden loss of his nine-year-old sister. He unpacks a box of preserved memories and remnants from her life. (Figure 2) Each object is in a void of space, surrounded by nothingness. The objects are saturated with emotion and are being devoured by time. Like fragments of memory, they appear vividly out of darkness in isolation, but contained. He emphasizes the container by photographing the object within something. In Figure 2 he gives us the cardboard box that contains each object. In Figure 3 a lock of hair is contained within a plastic bag. In my work, I emphasize the container by *only* giving the container. It then becomes the object. I am using these objects to negotiate with the intangible.



Figure 2, Philip Toledano, from series *When I Was Six*, 2015



Figure 3, Philip Toledano, from series *When I Was Six*, 2015

In John J. Priola's photographs, time passing is evident. (Figure 4) Each object is a trace of what was. He uses the objects to give shape to experience. The photograph itself is a kind of object used as a memorial. The inherent quality of a photograph marks the distance between the photograph of the object and the actual object. It creates distance, intimacy, and a feeling of displacement. The photograph makes the viewer aware of the absence of the thing itself. This absence or loss creates an inexplicable sadness because without loss, there is no mourning. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholy" Freud speaks of mourning as the intense longing for something absent to be present¹⁰. Priola's photographs create this longing. There is a similar feeling in my work in *Stack I* (Figure 1). Each object is a cast of something, a stand-in for the real thing. This absence of the actual thing creates a longing and moreover, constitutes a feeling of longing and mourning.

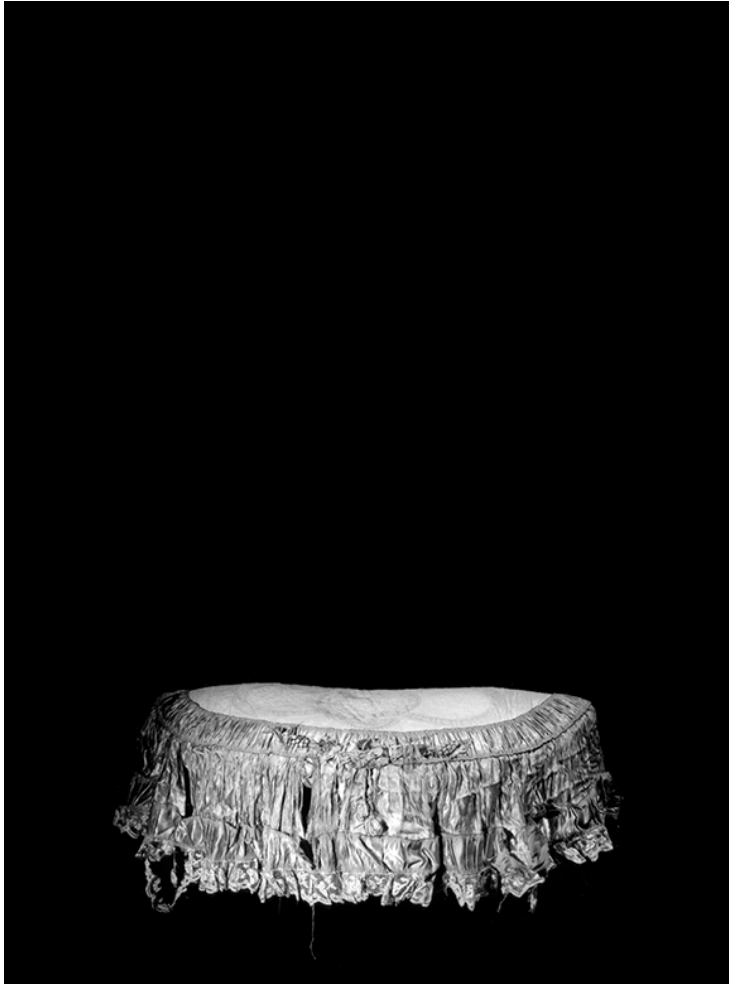


Figure 4, John J. Priola, *Pillow*, 1997

Rachel Whiteread's *House* materialized as a palpable imprint of absence. With this work Whiteread raised questions of memory as displacement of past into present, absence, and materiality. (Figures 5 and 6) *House* is a cast of the interior of a home. It is a solid mass, no longer inhabitable. She has turned the private, hidden space inside out and made it public.

Figure 5, Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993Figure 6, Rachel Whiteread, *House* (detail), 1993

Whiteread uses the process of casting to create her objects. This is a significant process. A cast is what is leftover after the transformation of liquid matter into solid usually by cooling down from extreme heat. It is also the solidifying of time. In his essay, "A Cast in Time", Richard Shone says, "A cast of an object traps it in time, eventually displaying two histories — its own past and the past of the object it replicates...it remains in the world to remind us of the dead, as both portrait and memorial, a replica and an object in its own right."¹¹ A cast is a connection to the past and creates an awareness of time passing by the absence of time. The cast is a reminder of the time and space in which the actual house existed in history. It is a memorial. Because the cast of *House* is no longer the house itself, but a replica solidified in time, it marks the space between presence and absence. The original has

been erased and the cast is a mark left by absence. Just like Priola and Toledano's photographs, Whiteroad is creating objects that make the viewer aware of the absence.

I cast the interior of spaces, particularly cardboard boxes. Porcelain slip is poured into each box and rolled over the interior surfaces. The remainder is poured out leaving behind a thin coat. The box is then put in the kiln and the cardboard is burned away leaving behind a delicate layer of the interior. Traces of the corrugation and the folds are left behind in the thin skin of porcelain. The work goes through a dramatic change in form and appearance. Liquid is transformed into porcelain and cardboard is burned away, leaving behind delicate, singed ashes and what remains are fragile porcelain skeletons of what once was. (Figure 7)



Figure 7, Amanda Helman, *Stack I* (Detail), 2015

I am an arranger and an organizer. In *Stack I* boxes are arranged like they would be in an attic. (Figure 8) Bits of stairs and spindles peak out between the heap. The work is organized and arranged in response to its surrounding space. The process is highly intuitive. I begin to stack and un-stack and restack, take away, then add again while letting the space guide the construction. The arrangement can never be replicated again. It is a process of understanding the work and using that information to create the structure. Repetition becomes important. By applying a single action to a single material countless times becomes a bodily experience in and of itself. The work transforms by creating a system, using a structure, and repeating incremental units that can go from finite to seemingly infinite.

We don't remember in sequential order and sometimes little details are changed over the course of time. Memories are stored and lost and pushed back and forward over and over. Our memories are organized like the attic: stacked haphazardly with holes in between. They are not arranged in neat drawers with labels on each one. Memories are buried so deep in our innermost being and sometimes they flash to the surface of our consciousness. When they do, they evince a poignancy that the more actively sought memories cannot match.

The stacked boxes are sensuous and visceral. They have a discernable heaviness. Each one is slumped and decaying. They seem as if they are slowly crumbling under the weight of each other. One can almost hear the cry and crunch of each box underneath as the top settles into the next or the scrape and cracks as they move and slide against each other. Variations of white unfold in a pile of ruins. They are a dusty white, like bones being weathered away with time. Ashes from its past life

float through air. There is a barely visible dust that settles. The tension of its fragility is palpable. The possibility of complete destruction is imminent. It seems to be balancing on the threshold of destruction or non-existence, swaying between the tangible and nothingness. Like the past, it is fragile and fleeting and we are holding on, trying to keep the memories from fading.

By casting boxes, I remove the particularity. Though they are so clearly casts of cardboard boxes, they still hold power over all of us for our own connotations we put on them. We all have a hidden container somewhere that holds important things. In my work I am using these containers as objects to negotiate with the intangible. I am trying to reveal the intimate, hidden spaces in which we put things; the place we put the memories from the past that we do not want to forget, but also where we put the memories that never existed, the ones that only existed in our minds but were forever lost.

The Intimate Space

Only memory allows the mind to retain the past. However, that memory becomes a trace of what was. We know it happened and that it was there, but now it only leaves behind a trace of that thing, like a sunken mattress. Rainier Maria Rilke spoke of this lost memory:

“Indeed, as I see it now, the way it appeared to my child’s eye, it is not a building, but is quite dissolved and distributed inside me: here one room, there another, and here a bit of corridor which, however, does not connect the two rooms, but is conserved in me in fragmentary form. Thus the whole thing is scattered about inside me, the rooms, the stairs that descended with such ceremonious slowness, others, narrow cages that mounted in a spiral movement, in the darkness of which we advanced like the blood in our veins.”¹²

It becomes fragmented. The fading memories are dispersed into enigmatic fragments of a whole that was itself already an assemblage of fragments now forgotten.

At times memories go back so far into a dateless void that we can no longer recall exactly where the hallway ended or what color the curtains were that hung over the sliding glass window. It is so fragmented that we begin to doubt if the memories are real or not. They are fragile. The past is situated elsewhere and both time and place are filled with a sense of unreality.

Gaston Bachelard said, “the house...bespeaks intimacy.”¹³ Places of experience store meaning about the past and home is one of the ultimate places of experience.

The home is often a focus for our desires and longings. In *Stack I*, the stacking and the accumulation of the single object creates a whole. This accumulation creates a space. (Figure 8) Like the cardboard boxes piled in my childhood attic, the porcelain boxes in *Stack I* become the space. Perla Korosec-Serfaty wrote about attics and how they are the important hidden places in homes that evoke experience.¹⁴ Just like the intimate, deep storage space of the attic, I have created a space that evokes an intimate experience. It offers viewers a place to negotiate with the intangible. It invites the viewer to experience and reconcile with loss and sadness. It is a space created from the marks and traces of the past; it is a residue.



Figure 8, Amanda Helman, *Stack I*, 2015

Bachelard goes on to describe the house as “one of the greatest powers of integration for our thoughts, memories, and dreams...Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home...it is because our memories of former

dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling places of the past remain in us for all time.”¹⁵ However, the longing for home is often a utopian view that can never be achieved, much like nostalgia. Nostalgia comes from the Greek word for homecoming. It was originally a medical condition similar to homesickness. When soldiers went to war or immigrants moved to a new place, they would develop a deep sadness and desire for their old home. Nostalgia was triggered by something reminding an individual of an event or item from the past and prompted various forms of sorrow or happiness. Though nostalgia is often a “desperate hunger to return to a time and a place that never really existed, a utopian fantasy through which our current longings get mapped onto the past.”¹⁶

Whiteread also used a place of intimacy, a house. It is a reminder and remainder of the domestic and familiar space. Though she “seems to deny any nostalgic return...and refuse all access to domestic familiarity.”¹⁷ Her work is literally impenetrable to the viewer. It is a solid mass people can no longer enter. This literal impenetrability makes it closed off to the unaccounted secrets and memories. This is a vital difference between Whiteread’s work and my own. While Whiteread’s literal impossibility to enter the home does not allow for nostalgia, my work does evoke this response. It creates a longing for a utopian fantasy, something that only exists in our minds. While the past is realized and a very important aspect of my work, it is the longing or absence of a memory that never actually existed that remains at the center of my work.

Conclusion

In my work, the containers become objects to remember, but also objects of loss. Instead of souvenirs of the past, they are souvenirs of the lost future. These cast objects reveal the hidden and make the absent present. They solidify the airy and immaterial. They stack and accumulate to form a space that invites intimacy and allows the viewer to partake in this experience. Through my investigation into this process, I have come to realize that though we know that all things decay and eventually crumble, our desire to hang on to memories of the past and lost memories of the future is not futile. In fact, it is intrinsic so we can reconcile with the otherwise fading and fragmented line between the intangible and the concrete. For after all, we still buy those snow globes, or hang on to those last two jars of apricots, or put things into a box.

Figures



Figure 1
Amanda Helman, *Stack I* (Detail), 2015



Figure 2
Philip Toledano, from series *When I Was Six*, 2015



Figure 3
Philip Toledano, from series *When I Was Six*, 2015

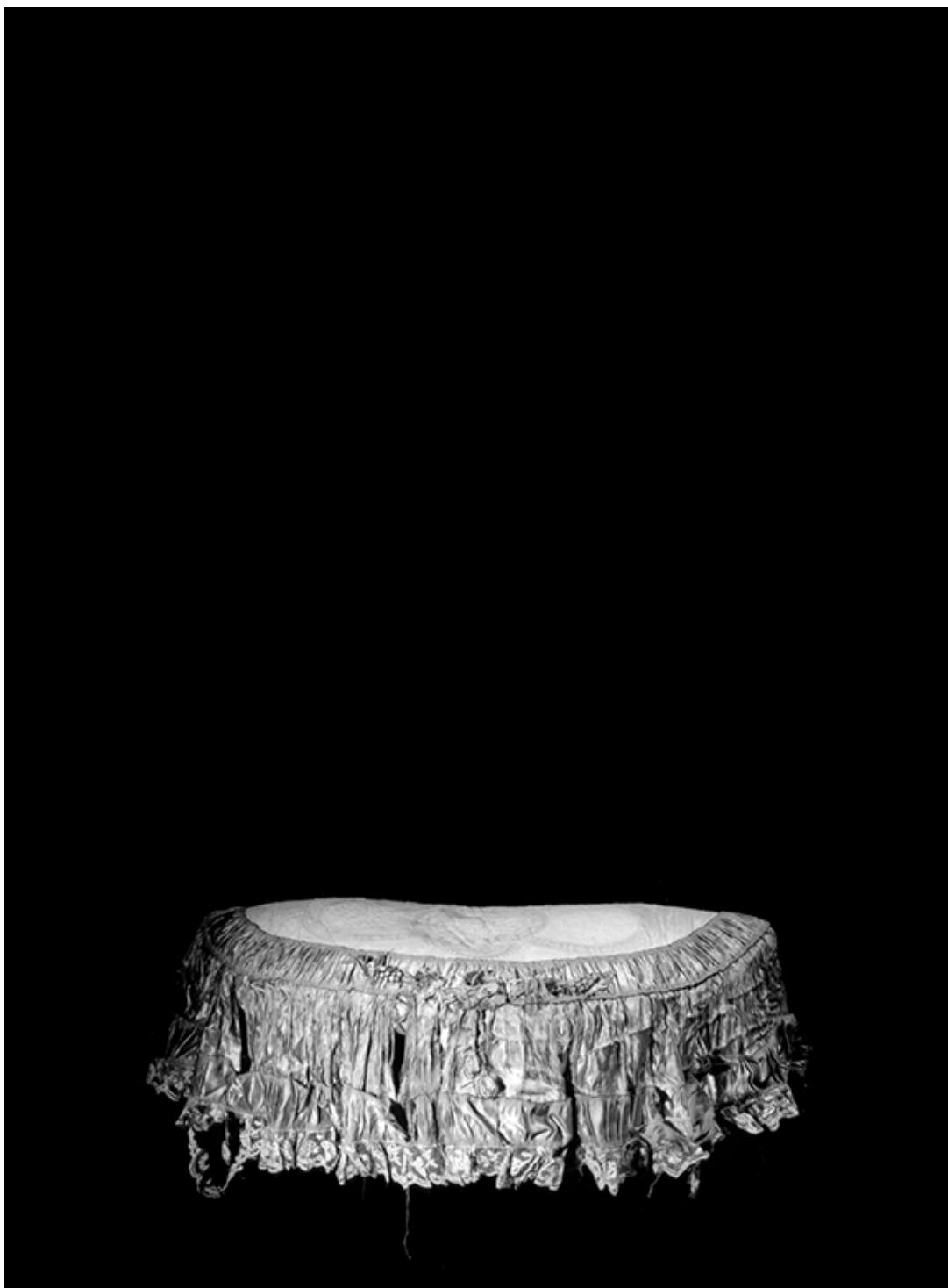


Figure 4
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Figure 5
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Figure 6
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Figure 6 Rachel Whiteread, *House* (Detail), 1993

Figure 7 Amanda Helman, *Stack I* (Detail), 2015

Figure 8, Amanda Helman, *Stack I*, 2015

Notes

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- ¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958), 72
- ² Rebecca Solnit, "The Color of Shadow, the Weight of Breath, the Sound of Dust" in John J. Priola *Once Removed*, 113
- ³ *Ibid*, 113
- ⁴ Henry Jenkins, "Death-Defying Superheroes" in *Evocative Objects*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 196-203
- ⁵ Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2013), 13
- ⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing, Baltimore*, (MD: John Hopkins Press, 1984), 135
- ⁷ Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*, 239
- ⁸ Lars Gustafsson, "Time, Pain, and Loss", in Sigrid Sandstrom *Grey Hope: The Persistence of Melancholy*, (Atopia Projects, 2006), 58
- ⁹ William Goyen, *The House of Breath* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1949), 56
- ¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholy" (London: The Hogarth Press, 1914) 243-258
- ¹¹ Richard Shone, "A Cast in Time" in James Lingwood *House*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), 52
- ¹² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), 33
- ¹³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958), 72
- ¹⁴ Perla Korosec-Serfaty, "The Home, from Attic to Cellar," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 4 (1984): 303-21.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 6
- ¹⁶ Jenkins, 200
- ¹⁷ Anthony Vidler, "A Dark Space" in James Lingwood *House*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), 71

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